DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 888 RC 021 442

AUTHOR French, Laurence Armand; Rodriguez, Richard Francis
TITLE Project BESTT: A Training Model for Rural, Multicultural, Bilingual Special Education.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Coming Together: Preparing for Rural Special Education in the 21st Century. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (18th, Charleston, SC, March 25-28, 1998); see RC 021 434.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Education; Bilingual Education; Cross Cultural Training; Diversity (Student); Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Masters Programs; Mexican American Education; *Program Development; Rural Education; *Special Education; *Teacher Education Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Bilingual Special Education; *Mexico United States Border; New Mexico; Western New Mexico University

ABSTRACT

Rural schools along the New Mexico-Mexico border face unusual challenges in meeting the special education needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) population. This population includes Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, Mexicans, and American Indians. Few school districts have an integrated or coordinated bilingual special education program, and many school personnel working with CLD exceptional children have only provisional endorsements in special or bilingual education. Project BESTT (Bilingual/ESL Special Education Teacher Training project) provides an innovative approach to this problem. Current project participants are 30 special education, regular education, and bilingual education personnel, primarily from minority backgrounds, who are working toward a Master's degree in bilingual special education at Western New Mexico State University. In view of the bilingual, tricultural flavor of the region, a major project goal is to promote cultural sensitivity among trainees. The project seeks to provide nearby school districts with a trained cadre of bilingual special education personnel, and in the long run, to refine and disseminate this preservice Master's degree program in bilingual special education. Steps in program development and strategies to ensure graduates the necessary competencies to work with CLD children are briefly outlined. Contains 23 references. (SV)

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Diane Montgomery

Laurence Armand French, Ph.D.s
Richard Francis Rodriguez, Ph.D..
Western New Mexico University
Silver City, New Mexico

ED 417 888

PROJECT BESTT: A TRAINING MODEL FOR RURAL, MULTICULTURAL, BILINGUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Introduction:

Two recent federal actions, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA, 1990) and passage of the North American Trade Agreement in 1993 (NAFTA, 1993), added a new dimension to special education in border areas. This situation poses new challenges especially among multicultural, bilingual rural populations such as exist along the Mexican/U.S. border and between the Quebec, Canada/U.S. border. Our training model is designed for special education/bilingual teachers working with these diverse student populations. The authors, between them, have experience with both border situations as well as a third dimension of this phenomenon -- that which exits between the larger dominant society and American Indian populations residing on rural reservations (Indian country). Project BESTT (Bilingual/ESL Special Education Teacher Training Project), a U.S. Department of Education funded training grant, is designed to provide a model for multicultural, bilingual special education within isolated rural areas. The purpose of our paper is to share the process of developing and implementing similar programs through the U.S. and in Indian country.

The Genesis of Project BESTT:

Essentially, Project BESTT emerged from the authors' collective experience with working with bilingual, culturally different populations. French, of French-Canadian descent, was involved in the bilingual, tri-cultural situation that exists along the northern New England/Quebec, Canada border. Here, distinctions are made between Anglo-Americans (Yankees), Franco-Americans (French-Canadians socialized within unique ethnic communities in the U.S.) and the French-Canadians of Quebec. Like their Hispanic counterparts in the southwest, French-Canadian/Franco-Americans have a language, culture, and social service delivery and educational system which departs markedly from that of the dominant U.S. society. Moreover, New England, and its Canadian neighbors, house American Indian Reservations (called *Reserves* in Canada). In this regard, our project shares elements with the one developed by Stanley Freeman, Jr. and Raymond Pelletier, at the University of Maine-Orono, for their Franco-American studies program which was funded through a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant (ES-3109-78-1272). Here, works by French- Canadians in the area of history, culture, literature, health, education and social issues are provided as a major component of the study of French-Canadian/Franco-American cultural diversity within both Canada and the U.S. (French, 1981).

RC 021 442

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French also has over twenty-five years experience working with mental health and educational issues within Indian country, notably with the Qualla Cherokees, Plains Sioux and Athapaskans (Navajo and Apache). Again, the issue of bilingual, multiculturalism exists with sensitivity required to discern between *traditional, assimilated,* and *marginal* Indians. Without an understanding of the polar opposites of the epistemological value systems of the aboriginal *Harmony Ethos* and the dominant society's Protestant Ethic, well meaning educators and health professionals are likely to exercise *ethnocentrism* in their clinical judgment. These three groups fall at different positions on the Harmony Ethos/Protestant Ethic continuum with the traditional Indians most likely to subscribe to the Harmony Ethos and the assimilated Indians being socialized within the dictates of the Protestant Ethic. Marginal Indians are those whose enculturation is such that they belong fully to either epistemological perspectives, thereby suffering most from psychocultural ambiguity (French, 1994; 1997; French & Hornbuckle, 1981).

Dr. Rodriguez was born and raised in the southwestern portion of New Mexico (Deming) which borders with Chihuahua, Mexico. Deming is the closest town (30 miles) of size between New Mexico and Palomas, Mexico -- the major border crossing. He is bilingual and his speciality area is special education. Dr.s Rodriguez and French, along with Dr. Virginia V. Sanchez, initiated *The Hands-Across-the-Border* project in January, 1990 which forged an international educational effort between U.S. teachers/student teachers and the teachers of the Mexican schools in Los Palomas. It was during this endeavor that we realized that the rural southwestern U.S. (west of El Paso, Texas and east of Tucson, Arizona) really had a bilingual, *tri-cultural* flavor -- something many local teachers and college faculty were unaware of -- even the Hispanic (Mexican-American) teachers and faculty who have lived along the border all their life. Hence, a major foundation of Project BESTT is that cultural sensitivity is a critical prerequisite for those being trained under our grant. Without this foundation addressing special needs we may very well unwittingly reflect ethnocentrism and a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby we unintentionally hurt those special need students we are mandated to assist under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The *Larry P. vs. Riles* (1972; 1974; 1979; 1984) controversy with the California schools relevant to Public Law 94-142 clearly illustrates a well meaning effort being sabotaged by ethnocentrism. Hence, cultural sensitivity, from a realistic perspective, is critical for a project such as this to succeed. Clearly, a realistic perspective of the cultures under study involves a comprehensive review of those cultures including ethnomethodological and ethnological experiences, especially by those directing the rural, multicultural, bilingual special education project.

Project BESTT's multicultural perspective:

New Mexico is an ideal classroom for multicultural studies. The state has the highest proportion of Hispanics (Mexican-Americans) in the U.S. (39%) and a rich and extensive history. New Mexico also has a substantial American Indian population with 19 Pueblos, 2 Apache Reservations and three components of the Navajo Nation -- the largest American Indian group residing on the biggest reservation in the United States.

American Indians comprise 9 percent of the state's population. This does not include the Mestizo, or Mexican/Indian mix which accounts for a large proportion of Mexican-Americans, especially those residing in the southwestern portion of the state where Project BESTT is administered. A high proportion of the Mexicans residing along the U.S. border, in what is termed, the *frontier,* are also Mesitzos. This proportion of American Indians in New Mexico also does not account for the thousands of Arizona Navajo who frequent the border town of Gallup and Farmington as well as the schools in the northwestern portion of New Mexico. Another unique characteristic of New Mexico's minority cultural groups is their stability. Both the Hispanics (Mexican-Americans) and American Indian groups had a long history predating U.S. Anglo-American and African-American involvement in this region. This stability has contributed to the maintenance of cultural traditions (Bailey & Bailey, 1986; French, 1994; Moses & Wilson, 1993; Sotomayor, 1991).

The Hispanic cultural influence extends back to the 1500s with the Spanish/Catholic influence. The interactions between the Spanish and the indigenous Native Americans and the resulting reciprocal sharing of cultural ways led to a distinctive *Mexican* culture. Today, despite a free and open border between New Mexico and Chihuahua, the Mexican and Mexican-American populations are sufficiently different as to warrant separate cultural entities. Thus, along the border we have a bilingual, tri-cultural situation. Further north, along the eastern Arizona and western New Mexico border, we have Hispanics (Mexican-Americans), Pueblo Indians, Navajo and Apache Indians in addition to the local *Anglos* (non-Hispanic Caucasians) presenting multiple languages and cultures -- factors that need to be addressed within any viable multicultural, bilingual, special education program. In the clinical realm, many of the aboriginal folk Indian ways were adopted by the Spanish and Mexicans and are still widely used by all southwestern groups. These are known as the Mestizo's ways within the Mexican/Mexican-American groups. The herbal healing and spiritual rites of the Mestizo's Ways are performed by a *Cuanderismo* -- an Indian, or mixed Indian/Hispanic healer, using a mix of traditional American Indian and early Mexican folk cures. An understanding of the Mestizo's Ways provides insight into the unique epistemological epistemology shared by border Mexican/Mexican-Americans and southwestern American Indians (French, 1997).

Project BESTT was designed to address the multicultural, bilingual (Spanish/English) special educational needs of an isolated rural border region of the southwest. Rural New Mexican schools, like their counterparts in Arizona, California, and Texas, have to deal with basically three cultural groups: Hispanics (Mexican-Americans), Anglo-Americans, and Mexicans, notably Mexican students. Many of the Mexican children and youth attending U.S. schools were born in the U.S. given that the closest hospital in the region is located in Deming, a thirty mile trip from the Mexican border and the town of Palomas. Thus, while these Mexican students and their parents reside in Mexico, the students hold dual citizenship and come across the border to attend U.S. schools, notably Columbus Elementary, Sun Shine Elementary School, and Deming High School -- all within the New Mexico Deming School District. The Hispanic (Mexican-American) population is comprised of about fifty percent of the

U.S. population within this region. The rural nature of this region adds to this challenge in that there are fewer resources than are found in the more populated areas. Another dimension is the bilingual/tri-cultural nature of the special education challenge. Marked differences exist, not only between the Anglo-American (*cowboy*) and Hispanic (Mexican-American) U.S. cultures but between the Mexican-American and Mexican cultures as well. This is a special consideration of our curriculum design.

The Project BESTT Model:

Project BESTT was designed to implement an innovative approach to personnel preparation in the emerging field of bilingual special education. The State of New Mexico recently adopted a non-categorical training endorsement. Project BESTT is designed to expand a bilingual/ESL version of this newly approved endorsement for the moderate needs teacher.

There is a critical need in the U.S. for bilingual special education personnel and programs. There are very few public school professionals with the unique crossover training necessary. Few, if any, school districts have an integrated or coordinated bilingual/special education program. For this reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, for most public school districts to adequately provide for the identification and instruction of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional (CLDE) children.

As school districts have increasing numbers of highly qualified, tenured personnel, specialized training must occur among existing school district personnel in order to have the greatest service impact on the needs of CLDE children. Many of the school personnel working with the CLDE children have only provisional endorsements or are not fully endorsed in special or bilingual education. Therefore, this project provides graduate-level training leading to a M.A. degree in bilingual special education to school district personnel, as well as new incoming students.

Trainees are comprised of 30 special education, regular and bilingual education personnel primarily from minority backgrounds who are working toward the Master's degree in bilingual special education. Training occurs on campus at Western New Mexico University.

The ultimate goal of the project is to develop, refine, and disseminate a preservice Master's degree program in bilingual special education. The intermediate goal is to provide school districts in the service area with a quality trained cadre of bilingual special education personnel who will be able to provide adequate and appropriate services to meet the unique cross-cultural, special, and bilingual/special education needs of CLDE students. The immediate goal of the project is to implement and expand an innovative Master's degree program for bilingual, and regular education personnel, and interested parents. The special education training to be provided through this project has been accredited and approved by both NCA and the New Mexico Department of Education.

This project has identified special needs which are being addressed during a three-year funding cycle. These needs are directly related to the development of a non-traditional preparation program specific to multicultural/bilingual exceptional children. Project BESTT focuses on identifying the teacher competencies necessary to provide appropriate educational experiences for these children and provides the specialized training required to meet these needs. Although there was some preliminary planning in respect to developing and establishing this unique training program, including identifying the teacher competencies necessary for multicultural/bilingual exceptional children and designing the teacher training curriculum, the actual implementation required additional resources which were not available to the Special Education Discipline at Western New Mexico University. These needs included the following:

1. Need to develop/implement materials to support instruction;
2. Need to recruit qualified students for the program who are bilingual and who wish training in bilingual special education;
3. Need to implement the training program specific to culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional children;
4. Need to evaluate the training program; and
5. Need to disseminate the program.

Much work went into meeting the above-stated needs. Instructional materials needed to support classroom instruction were selected based on current research in the field of bilingual special education and multicultural education. Contacts were made with other IHEs in the state and region to ascertain those instructional materials which have a proven effectiveness for Master's degrees in bilingual special education teacher preparation programs. Recruitment involved working with the school districts closest to the rural U.S. (New Mexico)/Mexico (Chihuahua) border. The school districts affected by Project BESTT (Deming, Silver City, Cobre and Lordsburg) are in dire need of teachers trained in bilingual special education. Consequently, graduates from this program will fulfill an immediate need in their respective districts. Furthermore, the districts involved will provide pay incentives for project participants upon completion of their degree. This incentive will help assure that teachers remain in their respective district (Atkinson, 1993; Axelson, 1993; Baca, 1984; Bender, 1998; Brehm & Kassin, 1993; Grossman, 1995; Lee, 1995; Moghaddam, et al, 1993; Pincus & Ehrlich, 1994; Schultz, 1996; Smith, 1998; Sotomayor, 1991; Vargas & Koss-Chioino, 1992).

The program is designed to ensure graduates the necessary competencies needed to work with CLDE children in the following fashion: First, program graduates are gaining skills in bilingual education and special education from a cultural centric perspective. Strategies for teaching the bilingual child with handicapping condition from the cultural and rural perspectives is a major emphasis of Project BESTT. Secondly, the program is designed to provide an array of practicum experience for trainees. Given that all trainees are classroom teachers, learned skills are being applied in the field throughout the teachers' program of study. The most current

research in these fields of training are being employed. This process ensures that graduates through the Project BESTT M.A. degree program will be among the finest trained bilingual special education teachers in the region, if not the U.S.

Project BESTT has an advisory committee which provides direction, advice and guidance to the project. Four out of five members have Ph.D.s in Education while the fifth member has a M.A. in Counseling Education and is the parent of a minority, severely handicapped child (Profound Mental Retardation). An objective, pre and post quasi-experimental, design using both an experimental (Project BESTT students) group and a control (teachers within the school districts who are not enrolled in Project BESTT) group, is being implemented with the pre-test already administered to both the experimental and control groups. The post-test will be administered following the completion of Project BESTT.

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